

Multiculturalism as Input, Outcome, and Moderator of Cultural Boundary Spanning in Japan

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Abstract

Building on boundary spanning, multiculturalism and Japan-related literatures, this paper proposes that multiculturalism can be considered as an outcome and as an input of cultural boundary spanning, and also as a moderator of the relationship between individual-level boundary spanning and organizational effectiveness. It is at societal, organizational and group levels that multiculturalism is an outcome. It is at the individual level that it is an input (or tool), for cultural boundary spanners, through the knowledge dimension of individual-level multiculturalism. Lastly, it is also at the individual level that multiculturalism moderates the effect of cultural boundary spanning on organizational effectiveness, through the identification and internalization dimensions of individual-level multiculturalism.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, biculturalism, cultural boundary spanner, cultural diversity, national culture, organizational culture, team, Japan

1. Introduction

Why is it relevant to study cultural boundary spanning in the Japanese context? While *The Economist* titled one of its recent edition “slowbalization” (*The Economist*, 2019), putting the accent on the decreasing pace of globalization after three decades of high tempo, Japanese Prime Minister Abe and his government have been concocting new legislation to open the country to more immigration. Hence, not only have many Japanese companies and other Japanese organizations in general, become multinational in the last three decades, but also the boundaries of the country itself are becoming more

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porous to the cultures of the outside world. It is in such a changing context that language differences and, more broadly, cultural barriers may impede the effectiveness of companies, at individual, team, or the whole organization levels. Conversely, cultural diversity fosters knowledge transfer and stimulates creativity and innovation. Being able to recognize and deal with cultural differences is hence crucial for Japanese organizations and individuals. If not everyone is endowed with the skills required to do so, it is however possible for Japanese organizations to identify, select, develop, and motivate those with the potential to increase the organizational effectiveness through the leveraging of their cultural skills. This paper's goal is to demonstrate the interplay of two streams of the literature, the stream on cultural boundary spanners and the stream on multiculturalism. We focus our discussion on the context of Japan.

2. What we know about cultural boundary spanning in Japanese companies

The cultural boundary spanner: definition of the core concept

The literature is abounding with terms such as mediators, go-betweens, bridge builders, mediators, or brokers, all closely linked to what is the focus of this paper, cultural boundary spanning. The central idea of the construct is that some individuals are in a better position to link, bridge, or mediate the relationship between to different cultural spheres, nodes, worlds. These linkages can be between organizations, typically the headquarters and a foreign subsidiary, but also two foreign subsidiaries or, in fact, any two distant nodes within (or outside) the organization, such as two teams both belonging to a department with a global reach. While the concept of boundary spanners is not limited to the context of bridging between different cultural and national groups (Sekiguchi, 2016), the term used in this paper of “cultural boundary spanner” is restricted to such a context, and has henceforth the same meaning that the term “bridge individual” used by Sekiguchi (2016).

How do they bridge?

The primary aspect of the cultural boundary spanner is of *linguistic* matter

(Harzing et al., 2011): their language skills allow bilingual individuals to bridge between different language groups. The second aspect, which derives from the linguistic one, is about *communication*. Nuanced communication is reliant on high linguistic proficiency. However, if conditional, the linguistic aspect is not sufficient. Wider *cultural* knowledge may be of prime importance to convey a message across two (or more) cultures. The cultural knowledge itself covers multiple facets, some of them more or less relevant to a given bridging *context*. For instance, knowledge of history maybe more pertinent in some circumstances while familiarity with contemporary popular culture may be more appropriate in another mediating situation: multicultural knowledge is context-specific (Vora et al., 2018). This relative cultural proximity gives Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Brazil their potential to become cultural boundary spanners for the local subsidiaries of Japanese multinational companies (Furusawa and Brewster, 2015). The same applies to Japanese self-initiated expatriates in China (Furusawa and Brewster, 2018).

3. Multiculturalism as an outcome: societal multiculturalism, organizational multiculturalism, and group-level multiculturalism in the Japanese context

The heavy focus on linguistics and culture of the above discussion leads us to think of bicultural and multicultural individuals as those with the highest potential for cultural boundary spanning. By definition, cultural boundary spanning requires the existence of and a contact between multiple cultures. At the most basic level, multiculturalism refers to people holding different values. Those values can manifest themselves in different ethnicities, races, national origins. Researchers have theorized multiculturalism at the societal, organizational, team, and individual levels. Societal and organizational levels relate to openness toward multiple cultures, while the third relates to group dynamics in the context of diverse groups (Vora, 2015). Japanese national culture – including national policies such as immigration policy – (societal level), Japanese corporate culture (organizational level), and the importance given to teamwork in Japan (group level) may all have a strong influence on cultural boundary spanning in Japanese organizations.

Multiculturalism at the societal level

At the societal level, the most commonly discussed framework is the dichotomy of assimilation and multiculturalism: “assimilation is when minority groups are expected to adapt to the dominant, majority group culture, while multiculturalism, or multicultural pluralism, refers to a society's recognition and celebration of diversity” (Vora, 2015). National policies and norms affect relationships between individuals and groups of different cultures. While the number of registered foreigners residing in Japan has nearly doubled in last 20 years (Yoo and Lee, 2016), Japan is one of the rich world's most homogenous countries: just 2% of residents are foreigners, compared with 4% in South Korea and 16% in France (The Economist Explains, 2018). Japan is a culturally homogeneous country with a small portion of racial, ethnic, or cultural minorities (Okubo, 2017). Using Japanese data from an international public-opinion survey, Nagayoshi (2011) showed that ethno-national identity had positive effects on the endorsement of multiculturalism, but had negative effects on the endorsement of equal rights for ethnic minorities. Since such a difference in rights may cause friction and require the intervention of cultural boundary spanners.

Multiculturalism at the organizational level

According to Cox's typology of monolithic, plural, and multicultural organizations (Cox, 1991), most Japanese companies would fall in the monolithic organization category. Still according to Cox (1991), organizational identification, the extent to which an employee define himself as a member of his employing organization, is strong in Japan (while, for instance, weak in the United States). Oki (Shimanuki et al., 2015) has researched the relationship between the difficulties faced by Japanese multinational companies in diversity management, their ethnocentrism and the centralization of decision making at their headquarters. The advantages of multiculturalism in organizations include “creativity, innovation, adaptability, cultural sensitivity toward customers, and improved decision making and problem solving, while the challenges include conflict, difficulties with coordination and integration, and poor performance” (Vora, 2015). Komisarof and Hua (2015), who have argued that organizational membership in Japan

is negotiated and can be gained, have downplayed the rice-paper ceiling advanced by Kopp (1994).

Multiculturalism at the group level

At the group level, multiculturalism deals with diversity. Adler (2008) proposes that group diversity ranges from homogeneous to multicultural, with token groups and bicultural groups being two particular cases. In culturally homogeneous Japan, team members tend to share similar backgrounds and to view the world in the same way. In groups where all but one member are Japanese, the foreign member (the token foreigner) may be tempted or pressured to “perform” along expected stereotypes (Fukuda, 2017). To alleviate linguistic barriers in their global teams some Japanese companies, such as Rakuten, have declared English their corporate language. There is little consensus on the advantages and disadvantages of respectively homogeneous and diverse groups. Disadvantages of multicultural teams include cross-cultural communication issues, conflict, low cohesion, slow decision-making, and performance issues (Vora, 2015), and these are precisely the problems expected to be solved by cultural boundary spanners. On the positive side, the same cultural boundary spanners are also expected to leverage the benefits of culturally diverse groups, such as improved decision-making, creativity, or innovation.

4. Multiculturalism as a input or tool for cultural boundary spanning

At the individual level, multiculturalism refers to individuals having more than one culture, with the most common case being biculturalism. Multiculturalism may start at birth, as for the *hafu* (Kamada, 2009), or come from a much later life-stage acculturation process, as for foreign students or some corporate expatriates. It may be associated with geographical relocation (e.g., Japanese *kikokushijo* or returnees) or not (e.g., African–Americans in the United States, and *zainichi* Koreans in the Japanese context (Bell, 2018)). These multicultural individuals have (more or less) internalized different cultural schemas and hence have been argued to have the ability to behave appropriately in different cultures, to engage in boundary spanning, and to

increase team or organizational effectiveness (Vora, 2015). In their review across academic disciplines, Vora et al. (2018) present individual-level multiculturalism as being defined either by context, by the acculturation process, by cognition, or by identification, and conclude by proposing to conceptualize multiculturalism as a tridimensional spectrum including a knowledge dimension, an identification dimension, and an internalization dimension.

The knowledge dimension of individual-level multiculturalism in the Japanese context

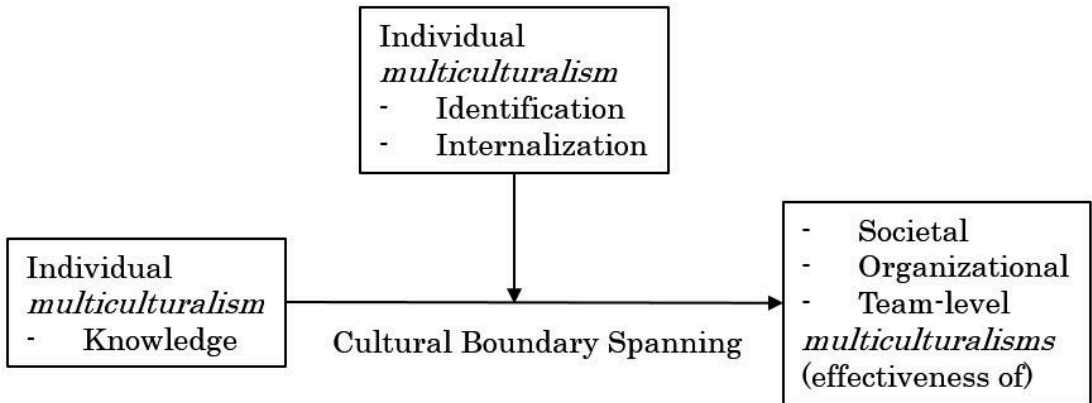
Vora et al. (2018) define this facet of individual multiculturalism as the “individuals’ level of understanding about cultural values, norms, beliefs, and appropriate behaviors, including linguistic knowledge” (p. 8). Insularity combined with homogeneousness make immediate and direct experience of foreign cultures difficult, its knowledge dimension may be the most straightforwardly useful facet of individual-level multiculturalism for cultural boundary spanning. Its measurement is nevertheless not straightforward. Even explicit language abilities, such as reading proficiency, may prove misleading when the individual is confronted to “live” situations, such as emotionally loaded negotiations. Knowledge of tacit cultural practices are even more difficult to evaluate. Even more problematic are the next stages: the ability to switch between cultural repertoires (cultural frame switching), and the ability to reconcile distant and conflicting cultures in a single place and moment. The uniqueness of Japanese culture (Suzuki, 1959; Huntington, 1997), even if only perceived, add to this difficulty. These abilities are, however, crucial for cultural boundary spanning.

5. Multiculturalism as a moderator of the relationship between cultural boundary spanning and organizational effectiveness

Vora et al. (2018) define the identification and internalization dimensions of individual multiculturalism as, respectively: “the degree to which individuals see themselves as cultural group members, and attach value and emotional significance to group membership” and “the degree to which societal cultural

values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices are reflected in an individual's own values, assumptions, beliefs, and practices" (p.10). In other words, identification and internalization are about ethos and pathos (while the first dimension of knowledge was about logos). These feelings and values are dynamic: they may change within an individual lifespan (after a personal experience, notably an extended stay abroad) but also along much longer timeframe and across whole populations. For instance, Bell (2018) describes how, while many *zainichi* Koreans of Japan continue to identify with North Korea, the nature of this relationship has changed with fluctuating generational attitudes towards both countries. *Hafu* are another example of the dynamic nature of these two facets of multiculturalism, especially in Japan where the issue is more controversial than in other industrialized countries (Kiesel and Haghirian, 2012). We call attention to the fact that identification and internalization, because of their emotional content, have the potential to be detrimental to the professional effectiveness of the cultural boundary spanner or to the effectiveness of his organization.

Figure 1: Relationships between multiculturalism's levels



6. Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed how, in the context of Japan, the study of multiculturalism at multiple levels (societal, organizational, group-level, and individual-level) is relevant to analyze and understand cultural boundary spanning (Figure 1). The first three levels of multiculturalism inform us both on the needs and on the contingencies of cultural boundary spanning in Japan.

The fourth level, multiculturalism within individuals, can be seen as a tool for effective cultural boundary spanning in teams, in organizations, and in society. Furthermore, the tridimensional conceptualization of individual multiculturalism proposed by Vora et al. (2018) can guide our research in two ways. Firstly, to sort out the bridging tools of the cultural boundary spanner (essentially, the knowledge-related facets of his multiculturalism). Secondly, to understand the moderating effects of the identification- and internalization-related facets of his multiculturalism on the effectiveness (from an organizational point of view) of his bridging activities.

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